

An interview with Margaret Lister: the 1972 Coal Queen

Paul Ward, University of Huddersfield, January 2012

An edited version of this interview has been published in Barber Swindells, *Mining Couture: A Manifesto for Common Wear*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2012 isbn 9781907317927.

The original interview recording is available from paul.ward@hud.ac.uk

The band playing and crowds sat watching: The world of the Coal Queen

‘I remember speaking to Joe Gormley [President of the National Union of Miners in the 1970s] in the pit yard. I went to Acton Hall Colliery to do an underground trip and he was sat at the top in miner’s clothes and I was dressed in a mini skirt before I got changed, and I’m just doing this to him in the photograph and he’s just sat there how men do when they’re in their mining gear and I’m just chatting with him, we were having a bit of a laugh and I’m just pointing at him and one of the photographers got a fantastic photograph.’

The everyday clothing of miners was brought into sharp relief by the glamour of the Coal Queens. Between 1969 and 1983 a National Coal Queen was crowned to represent the industry at national events to promote the continuing importance of coal to the British economy. This was a beauty contest for the wives and daughters of coalminers, designed to bring colour, sparkle and glamour to an industry that had been beset by low wages and danger (in Yorkshire alone in the 1970s there were three pit disasters killing more than five people). After the Second World War, local beauty competitions began to be held in mining communities across Britain and these developed, with the support of the National Coal Board and the National Union of Miners, into regional and national competitions. At a local level, winners were picked at dance halls and miners’ galas, with the national final being held at the miners’ holiday camp at Skegness until 1975 and then at the Imperial Hotel at Blackpool after that.

Margaret Dominiak (now Lister) was like any girl living in the West Yorkshire coalfields in the 1950s and 1960s but in 1972 she became one of only fifteen women to win the National Coal Queen competition. ‘It was a lovely experience for me,’ she said. ‘I was just an ordinary coal-miner’s daughter.’

Margaret was a child in Warmfield, near Normanton in West Yorkshire, and her father worked at Sharlston Colliery. In this oral history interview, with Professor Paul Ward and Dr Steve Swindells of the University of Huddersfield, Margaret recalls her life story and the importance of her crowning as Coal Queen in it.

‘When I was 2 or 3 years old I can remember living in lodgings with my mum and dad because they had to live in lodgings when they were first married. They couldn’t afford to set up house. I remember my dad working at the local pit and things like listening when my dad was ready for work. Listening to the pit buzzer going, hooting, it was a hooter, and the knocker-upper knocking on the windows.

The first five years of my life I spent living with my grandma, so you see, she was born in 1901 and it was her who taught me to cook because I used to watch how she made all the food all day ...Two or three times a week she would go and buy things from the greengrocer and the butcher and their used to be a delivery man to come and sell things like vinegar and paraffin. I remember his name, they called him Campy and he had a van. Nothing was bottled in them days; it was poured from large containers down a funnel into a container and you had to take your own container. Grandma used to look out the window the same time every week and would say, ‘Oh, Campy is here, I need some of this, I need some of that’, you know. There were no fridges so all the food that she would make she would put in a cold store north facing of the house on a flat marble area.

I remember wash day was a Monday and it was a really big day for Mum because she used to have to light the fire under this big square boiler and then she had a posser to agitate the clothes and then she had to use big wooden rollers to get the water out of the clothes so it was really tiring for her. I remember all this going on, when you look at it today, the washing machine, it’s in, out, dried, finished and this is why women couldn’t work in them days because the chores were just too great that they didn’t have time to go to work, bring up a family, etc. Then they had a chore for each day.

When I was ten years old we then were given a new council house, all the old coal mining houses were demolished and we got a brand new council house, it was great. We got a garden and an inside toilet and my Mum and Dad lived there right until they died. It was a new estate: Queen Elizabeth Drive in Normanton.

I married in 1966 and I was just eighteen and I started off having a family so my children grew up in the Seventies. In 1971 my husband, who, of course, worked in the mines came home from a social event and he just came home and he said, ‘Oh, by the way I’ve just entered you into a competition’, the Coal Queen competition, which I had never heard of before. It was a competition within the mining community which was held at a local dance hall and ours was the Mecca in Wakefield.

It was a dance and I used to love it because all our friends when we were still growing up and starting to court used to go to the Mecca. This was in the Sixties, of course. My husband, he came home with the form and said I’ve entered you and we’re going to the Mecca on so and so a day, so we rang all our friends up and they said ‘Oh yeah, we’re going as well.’ It was just a dance at the local Mecca and four girls were picked out of the competition, one of them being me, one of them being my friend Susan and a couple I didn’t know. We were all put forward to the Yorkshire final which was at the miner’s gala. It was a perfect day to have the Coal Queen competition. The

Yorkshire Coal Queen competition was held in Wakefield in Thornes Park and so we didn't live so far away, we lived at Normanton which was 5 miles away from Wakefield so we got our glad rags on.

All women think about what they wear, especially if they are going into a competition. I lived very close to a lady who used to have a dress shop and I always remember she was a bubbly lady and I used to talk to her as a teenager. The shop was in the town of Normanton, right in the centre. I remember saying, 'Right, I'm going in for this competition, what have you got in that I could make a splash, make myself look nice?' I went through the rails and for the first heat I found my own thing which was a petticoat type dress with a bib. They were all in in those days, but when it got to the Yorkshire final I had to buy something new and then I went to this lady's dress shop, the neighbour's dress shop, and she fitted me out in turquoise shoes. I bought a big white dress and it was very short because the mini skirt was in and it had big puff sleeves with different colours. It had turquoise, browns, oranges. It was absolutely fabulous and then I had to hang around for some turquoise shoes to match the sleeves. I loved that dress. Then I looked for earrings which were a perfect match to the shoes. I gave a bit of thought to the Yorkshire competition!

There was Arthur Scargill in the park, you know, and there was the band playing and crowds sat watching the competition and beauticians there to make you up and judges to judge the competition. They picked three out, my friend Susan came third, there was a girl came second who I didn't know, and I came first and I then was sent to the national final. From June 1972, I was Yorkshire Coal Queen and then I entered the national at the end of September so there were three months to get ready for that competition.

What am I going to wear for this? So, me being as I am, I like a bargain, I don't go out and buy the first dress, I wanted a bargain and I wanted quality as well. So I went to Leeds and there was a big store there, one of the big stores, Miss Selfridge, when Lewis's was in its heyday. The July sales were on and I went in and saw this white dress gathered at the front with like diamante, long and sleek.

And I saw this dress in the sale and it was something like £40 proper price and I think I got it cheap, cheap. I thought that was ok, white, diamante. I was quite a stunner in them days because I had long hair and I thought if I put my hair up around here, that would be ok. The same with the bathing suit, I found a white one. I don't know why it was white but I had to find white shoes, so I went to Doncaster thinking at the time there were big, thick heeled shoes that didn't do anything for your legs. I thought these won't do and somebody said there was a shop in Doncaster that still sold stiletto heels. The stiletto emphasised the calf of your leg, although this wasn't just a beauty competition, it was all about the personality of the girl and how she tackled her tasks with the National Coal Board, whether she could be a celebrity and an ambassador for the coal board, so there was a lot of things to take into consideration. Anyway, I found all the gear (on the cheap!) and packed my case and we were off to Skeggy.

We went on the Coal Queen train to Skegness. There was a parade through the streets, parading the last year's winner, who was Judith Hargreaves, who I made a very good friend of, and of course she was on the float.

The Saturday night was the competition. We had to be in our places, we had got our numbers and it was a big theatre, with pictures of each girl. They didn't have video in those days, so they had slides coming up when the girl went on stage and we had three appearances. We had one with the evening

dress, one when we were interviewed on stage and then one with the swimsuit and then all the girls came on together as a finale at the end.

Mick Milligan was the compere of the miners' camp and he stretched out the announcement of the winner, asking, 'So who is going to be the Coal Queen of 1972?' and everybody was waiting, quite a big audience really. There were cameras and news cameras and everybody there waiting and the thing about it was that I forgot to put my number on my arm – I was number 12 – and I thought I haven't got a cat in hell's chance here so I'm sat back in my chair, you know, and there was a pretty girl from Wales, I remember her, she was only 18 years old and I thought she's got a good chance of winning, and when they called me out I couldn't believe it!

We had had this interview a few hours before and they were looking for somebody who could talk to people, who could represent the Coal Board, who had a sense of humour, lots of things they were looking for. Derek Ezra, who was in charge of the Coal Board at that time, and his wife, were the judges and a couple called Mr and Mrs Crawford were heavily involved in the Coal Board too. There were six judges all together, three men, three women and they were firing certain questions at us and they knew you could cope with the workload. Basically I think I won the competition because I was more mature. I was 24 years old which I was one of the oldest girls in the line up and I think because I showed maturity and I was able to cope with a lot of the work I think that was what fixed it for me.

When I was Coal Queen I used to try my best to do anything that the Coal Board asked me to do because I enjoyed the work, I enjoyed the people that I was dealing with. I went up and down the country. I went to the Ideal Homes Exhibition. I met Her Majesty the Queen at Olympia at the Ideal Homes Exhibition

I never used to know what it was like to go out for dinner, to get dressed up because we couldn't afford it in those days. Then, of course, they wanted you to be nice and wear nice things and they showed you etiquette and they show you to how to meet people and how to speak to people, so all this experience going up and down the country and being an ambassador for the Coal Board was great.

First of all they gave me a modelling course. They took us to Steiner who were the people who made all the wigs and everywhere they took us they made it so that we were educated in their product and it was actually educating your mind as well. They took us out for dinner, took us down to Oxford Street. Three days after we won the competition they took us straight down to London and all these things started to happen. It was like a big whirlwind and it opened the eyes of a northern girl coming away from the mining area, taking you to London. We were in the best limousines and they took us to British Home Stores because that was the biggest store in those days, British Home Stores! We could choose what we wanted to a certain price range and we came away with big bags. And we went to dress designer places and it was all set out for us. The lady who looked after us was called Dorothy Baker and she looked after all the girls and made sure they were looked after properly. They were actually educating us without us realising what they were doing. We were just enjoying the time we had but they knew what they were doing. Then I had to start work for the Coal Board. The year I was the national Coal Queen I went all over the place, up and down the country

They brought this rose out called the Living Flame, so I had to go and have some photographs taken and I chose the dress that I won the Yorkshire final in, the little white one with the fancy puff sleeves and it looked fantastic against the colour of the roses. The Living Flame had the orange colour that I

had in my sleeves. And of course everything that I did was in the *Coal News*. Everything was publicised, so I had a fantastic time in all.

There were Coal Queen reunions in later years. Yvette Shilton was the girl who won in 1976. That was the first year it was held in Blackpool at the Imperial Hotel, not a cabin in the miners camp! So it was getting bigger and bigger as the years went on and so something really nice my dress had to be, I put a lot of time in thinking about things, colours, whether it suited me.

I bought a blue floral dress for the reunion in 1976. It's what I used to call a handkerchief dress because it goes to a V from under the arms in the middle and then it is layered right down to the floor. It had shoe string straps and I think what attracted me to it, more than anything, was the material because the material, with having auburn hair – in those days I had really strong auburn hair – and the blues in the dress (Turquoise was my favourite colour) and it stood out when I saw it. It was chiffon and I like chiffon and I just thought it was very striking at the time, which was why I bought it.

Coming to the end of being Coal Queen was a bit of an anti-climax because I enjoyed doing it that much that I didn't want to give it up. Saying that, you know, everything has to come to an end and I then had to stay myself which way I wanted to go and I came over to Halifax through something I had done at the Coal Board. I was in Wakefield and I felt as though I needed a boost after the competition. I wrote to a gentleman who I had done some promotion work for. It was Webster's Brewery in Halifax and he said if you ever need a job, because I did some work for him and he was quite pleased with how I presented myself and he said don't ever hesitate to write to me so I put pen to paper. I wrote him a letter and said I had come to a crossroads and needed somewhere else to go and I got a pub with my husband called the Fountain Head in Halifax. I started doing the catering, he ran the bar, and I always said when I came out of the pub that I would like to go to college and do my qualifications. From there I stayed on and got a part time teaching job, ended up at the university doing my Certificate of Education and then I got a full time job with Calderdale College, which then transferred me to Keighley and I set up the complete unit up for under privileged students. It was the job satisfaction that I thrived on and, now, of course, I'm retired. Sometimes I think I could do with another job. I'm still too young to retire in a way because my brain is too active!

See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/feb/22/britishidentity.gender> for photographs of Margaret Dominiak in the 1970s.